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NUTRITION COMMITTEE NEWS

For exchange of information on nutrition education and school lunch activities

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, Washington, D. C.

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER, 1961

NUTRITION EDUCATION FOR TEENAGERS

MARY M. HILL, ED.D., NUTRITIONIST, INSTITUTE OF HOME ECONOMICS

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From this group, too, must come a goodly proportion of the armed forces and the nation's leaders in the uncertain years ahead. Their creativity and productivity will depend, in part, on their physical and mental health.

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In this issue of NCN, we describe this activity and several in the U.S. that may be helpful to workers in school and community programs.

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Teenage food habits in New Jersey, as revealed by the State Nutrition Council's "Survey of Teenage Food Habits," were discussed. It was agreed that action should be taken (1) to acquaint teenagers, their parents, and other community members with the need for improved food practices, and (2) to initiate activities that would promote the necessary behavorial changes in eating habits.

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A county nutrition committee was formed which meets twice each month. The chairman and key members are teenagers. Adults from school and community agencies serve as consultants.

The young people, with the help of adult specialists, are making the decisions on the content of the program and carrying on the campaign for better food habits.

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Students in the six Sussex County high schools continue to participate actively in this effort to promote better food selection. They named it the "What Four" campaign.

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At a later date, a second survey will be made to measure the results of the nutrition education program that followed.

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Resource materials.—The New Jersey Nutrition Council and the State Extension Foods and Nutrition Specialist each developed an exhibit on teenage nutrition. These exhibits were widely used throughout the county.

Leaflets prepared by the State Extension Service and the State Department of Health have been most useful in setting forth the problems and suggesting ways for young people to achieve or maintain good food practices.

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The teenagers and their adult consultants recognized that poor food practices among teenagers usually have their beginnings much earlier. Therefore, a positive approach to the teenage problem lies in prevention as well as cure.

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Program Continues

The activities described above represent progress made in one academic year. The program is centered in the schools but is not confined to them. Parents, other community members, and the press have been involved in the development of a program which, although directed at teenagers, has a potential for helping the entire community achieve good health through good nutrition.

Shortly after school opened in September 1961, the nutrition committee met—chaired by a teenager. Work began with plans for students to participate in nutrition skits and panel discussions to be presented to students in school assemblies and to parent groups. By early October, plans were completed and teenage teams selected to work on public presentations. All concerned are hopeful that progress in the 1961-62 academic year will surpass that of last year.

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The Situation Defined

The morning session included discussions by a nutrition educator, a dentist, physicians, and home economists on various phases of foods and nutrition for the teenager. These forceful and realistic discussions were concerned with nutritional needs and the factors which influence them, the food habits of teenagers as revealed by surveys, and the great independence of choice made possible by a knowledge of food values.

Reports of Discussion Groups

- *Parental example.* These young people said that they were influenced more by what their parents do than by what they say. For example, adults often talk about the importance of milk and at the same time avoid including it in their own meals. If breakfast is important, parents as well as children should eat it.
- *Participation in meal planning.* Both boys and girls wanted to be included in planning family and school lunch menus. Many of them felt their presence in the home kitchen was welcome only at dishwashing time. They indicated a willingness to participate in planning school activities at which food is to be served, such as the school lunch, proms, and fund-raising projects.

• *Activities to broaden food tastes.* These young people wanted opportunities to broaden their food tastes. They were eager to eat in restaurants, see different types of food service, and try unfamiliar dishes. They also wanted to learn more about the varieties of foods and ways to combine them. Unconventional food combinations for breakfast —although not appealing to adults—intrigued the teenagers. They realized, however, that freedom to make unconventional choices carries with it the responsibility to learn how to choose and still meet nutritional needs.

• *Nutrition information.* From the discussion reports, it was evident that teenagers wanted to know the "why" of nutrition knowledge so they could make wise food choices. They felt such knowledge would help them to recognize misinformation or misleading statements used to promote products or diets. These youth were also eager to know where to get sound information about food and nutrition.

Implications for Adults

1. Because their eating habits and attitudes toward foods are readily transmitted, parents should set a good example to insure the nutritional health of their children.

2. If teenagers are to have some measure of control over their environment, they should be involved in meal planning both at home and at school.

3. To help young people develop the ability to select foods wisely, opportunities should be provided for them to broaden their tastes and their knowledge of foods.

4. Teachers must be well informed in the science of nutrition if they are going to teach the "why" of nutrition knowledge.

A HEALTH DEPARTMENT ATTACKS OBESITY PROBLEM

Nurses and physicians in the Providence, Rhode Island Health Department who have responsibilities in schools have been concerned by the number of obese and overweight children in both elementary and secondary schools. They believe obesity among adolescents, although acute, probably has its beginnings much earlier. Therefore, any program initiated should be twofold; it should be directed not only to teenagers but also, as a preventive measure, to younger children.

Planning An Approach

During the 1960-61 academic year, an intensive program was planned. The director of nursing service in the Providence Health Department and the nutrition consultant from the U. S. Public Health Service, currently on loan to the State Health Department, planned and conducted a meeting to consider the problem and explore possible means of attacking it. Nurses, school physicians, a U. S. Public Health Service physician, and a State Health Department physician attended.

Later, city health department personnel worked out a program using many of the ideas discussed at the initial meeting. It was decided that parental cooperation would be essential. A letter was drafted to be sent to parents of children selected to participate in the program. A meeting was also planned to acquaint parents with the situation, the need for a positive health program for their children, and the contemplated activities planned for them.

The Program Gets Underway

Physicians reported 740 children overweight in the 29 schools under health department jurisdiction. The youngsters were told they had been selected to participate in a special health program and letters would be sent inviting their parents to attend a meeting at which the program would be discussed. The terms "overweight" and "obese" were not used but the students knew why they had been selected. One mother asked her son how he came to be chosen. He said he didn't know but "we all waddled in."

Many parents attended the meeting. Some, who could not attend, contacted the school nurse and pledged cooperation. There were some who informed the nurse they were not interested; and, of course, there were many who did not respond in any way. Work was begun with 329 students, enrolled in 22 different schools, whose parents were interested and willing to cooperate.

Nurses met with children in groups of 5 to 10 at regular intervals. In some schools, they met every week; in others, every 2 weeks. Students weighed and recorded their weight themselves. At each meeting some aspect of nutrition, diet, and exercise was discussed.

The program was generally well received by students—evidence that a positive approach is a good one. For example, in the two girls' high schools, the students decided their group should have a name. One group called themselves "Tons of Fun" and the other decided on "Fat Ladies Auxiliary." The seniors in the latter group each contributed 5 cents a week to a fund which was awarded to the senior who lost the most weight by graduation day. The competition was very keen.

Results

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They decided, among other things, to work on the nutritional problems of today's teenagers because so many will marry early and become parents in the near future. The nutritional needs of this group are already great because of their rapid growth rate. In addition, many Canadian teenagers are:

- known to eat inadequate lunches and to make poor selections of snack foods
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A mining area was chosen for one nutrition project because of the economic problem existing there as a result of closing the mines. Also, a similar project had been carried out in a rural Cape Breton area which would make an interesting comparison with an urban area.

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Responses to a questionnaire, prepared to learn about the food habits of 277 students, confirmed the opinion of the nutritionist that nutrition education was needed.

Evaluation

At the close of the course, the nutritionist evaluated the project. She felt it had been worthwhile because of the teenagers' attitude toward the work and their interested cooperation during the classes and in responding to the questionnaires.

Students were also asked a series of questions to assist the nutritionist in evaluating the project. The answers indicated that the youth had acquired nutrition information and could see a need for it as well as a need to make an effort to improve eating habits by (1) eating regular meals consistent with Canada's Food Rules, and (2) making better selections of snack foods.

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Institute of Home Economics, Agricultural Research Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, in consultation with the Interagency Committee on Nutrition Education and School Lunch. (The printing of this publication has been approved by the Bureau of the Budget, May 22, 1958.)

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